
135th Session of the Committee of Ministers (Chişinău, 15 May 2026)

Council of Europe Strategy on External Action

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. FROM EXTERNAL RELATIONS TO EXTERNAL ACTION: A FORWARD-LOOKING COUNCIL OF EUROPE.....	3
A. Context	3
B. Vision: a forward-looking Council of Europe	3
C. Why strengthen external action?.....	4
1. Geopolitical shifts and questioning of Council of Europe values, principles and standards	4
2. Democratic security	4
3. Fragmentation of multilateralism.....	4
II. HOW TO ACHIEVE THE VISION.....	5
A. Strategic objective.....	5
B. Guiding principles	5
C. Main pillars of the Strategy on External Action.....	5
Pillar 1 – Expanding participation in the Council of Europe’s legal and normative instruments	5
Pillar 2 – Increasing strategic engagement with Observer States and non-member States	6
Pillar 3 – Strengthening partnerships with relevant international and regional organisations	6
D. Next steps.....	7

I. FROM EXTERNAL RELATIONS TO EXTERNAL ACTION: A FORWARD-LOOKING COUNCIL OF EUROPE

A. Context

The Council of Europe (CoE) is a regional European organisation that has increasingly developed its scope for action and outreach beyond its member States and that, in light of emerging global challenges, undertakes to strengthen its external action. The European system of human rights protection embodied by the CoE, with its unique European Court of Human Rights and conventional framework, represents the centrepiece of the CoE's value system. While its membership is and will remain European, the CoE's values and principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and the related standards, are universally relevant.

The values, principles and standards defended by the CoE are increasingly under pressure in a constantly changing geopolitical environment, with shifting power, influence, and alliances. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, divergence in governance models, democratic backsliding, anti-rights movements, technological disruption, migration challenges, climate-related instability, growing socio-economic inequalities and the erosion of multilateralism are affecting democratic security and the protection of human rights, including within the European continent itself. Standard-setting is becoming increasingly dispersed across different regions of the world.

In a challenging context, which risks undermining the substance of the CoE's values, principles and standards, the authority of the latter can have a positive impact at the international level. As a regional actor, the CoE has the opportunity and responsibility to maintain and protect the universality of human rights and the respect of international law, including the UN Charter. At the same time, the CoE's external promotion of its values and standards also serves as a way to reinforce their implementation at the domestic level.

Defending democratic security and respect for human rights inside Europe requires coherent, proactive and visible engagement beyond Europe. This includes intensified dialogue with Observer States, non-member States, relevant international and regional organisations, global standard-setters, and other actors and stakeholders (such as civil society and the private sector) willing to engage on the basis of the CoE's values, standards and expertise, as well as technical co-operation to reinforce democratic institutions.

B. Vision: a forward-looking Council of Europe

The Strategy aims to enhance the global position of the CoE as a regional contributor to:

- Promote and consolidate the values and principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and standards in areas linked to its mandate;
- Protect human rights and democratic security and the international law-based order, through renewed, proactive multilateralism and the respect of international law.

Building, among others, on the 2011 Policy of the CoE towards neighbouring regions, the 2023 Reykjavík Declaration and the Secretary General's orientations in SG/Inf(2025)33, this Strategy enriches the ad hoc and demand-driven external relations with a coherent, more proactive, and values-based external action, informed by the Organisation's past experience. It reflects the CoE's long-term ambition, strategic orientation (to remain *fit-for-purpose*) and objectives, and is grounded in a forward-looking approach to anticipate emerging challenges and opportunities. The New Democratic Pact for Europe ("the Pact") should serve as a conceptual foundation for this approach.

C. Why strengthen external action?

1. Geopolitical shifts and questioning of CoE values, principles and standards

The current geopolitical context is marked by global and accelerated challenges to the international law-based order, to justice, to accountability, to governance and the universality of human rights, as illustrated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and neighbouring conflicts. Outside Europe, alternative governance models and standards are also promoted, contributing to growing normative competition and fragmentation, with direct implications for Europe and the integrity of its multilateral human rights system.

A strengthened external action responds to these geopolitical shifts, while reaffirming the integrity, authority and relevance of the CoE's normative framework across Europe and beyond.

By actively promoting and defending, in global and regional fora, its binding and non-binding standards, independent monitoring mechanisms, and decades of jurisprudence, institutional expertise and technical co-operation, the Organisation therefore reinforces their legitimacy at the global level. It also prevents their dilution through competing international norms and reaffirms the CoE's role as the reference point for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. External action will focus on existing and emerging fields, such as, but not limited to, the governance of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, foreign interference and organised crime, accountability and the fight against disinformation, as well as combating discrimination and intolerance.

2. Democratic security

Democratic security is not an abstract concept, including in Europe, as foreign interference with electoral conditions and processes in several CoE member States has demonstrated. Accountability, institutional resilience, the rule of law and public trust in democratic systems have become core security issues. Democratic security also depends on the integrity, transparency and accountability of civic space and public institutions.

Democratic security should be strengthened by reinforcing engagement with our immediate neighbourhood, namely the Mediterranean region, the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as Latin America, and Africa, grounded in respect, reciprocity, and mutual learning. Ongoing co-operation with Mediterranean countries has yielded results, which provide examples of how CoE standards can be promoted beyond membership, notably in a number of existing and emerging fields, including, but not limited to, human rights protection justice reform, artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, cybercrime, data protection, the environment, and youth participation, as well as migration.¹ These partnerships illustrate the CoE's ability to reinforce its values, principles and standards through co-operation, capacity-building and dialogue.

3. Fragmentation of multilateralism

Traditional mechanisms of global governance are facing unprecedented challenges. In this context, regional organisations are essential stabilisers of the international law-based order, and carriers of international norms.

In this evolving reality, where global multilateralism is under pressure, enhanced dialogue and co-operation among international and regional organisations can contribute to greater coherence, mutual understanding and effectiveness in addressing global, transnational and emerging challenges. Given its track record and normative influence, as well as its fundamental human rights protection system, based on the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court of Human Rights, the CoE is well placed to contribute to, and facilitate, cross-regional exchanges. Through stronger engagement in a strategic dialogue with other international and regional actors, the CoE can champion democratic security and help restore trust and effectiveness within a fragmented multilateral landscape.

¹ The list reflects the main areas of the Neighbourhood Partnership co-operation.

II. HOW TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

A. Strategic objective

To advance the promotion of values, principles and standards of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, including its fundamental commitment to gender equality, as well as to protect democratic security. This can be done through legal outreach, targeted political dialogue, and co-operation with current and potential observer States, States of neighbouring regions, as well as non-member States and relevant international and regional organisations.

B. Guiding principles

- **Reinforcement of the CoE's core mandate:** The Strategy requires strong ownership from member States. External action does not undermine the Organisation's priorities and responsibilities towards its member States.
- **Democratic security as a transversal concept:** external action contributes to the resilience of democracy, the rule of law and human rights as foundations of sustainable peace and stability.
- **Added value and complementarity:** external action must be coherent with the work of relevant international and regional organisations, primarily, of the European Union, as well as that of the United Nations (UN), and of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and must seek efficiency and foster synergies with these organisations. It should be guided by clear objectives with a focus on added value and not duplicate work done by other organisations.
- **Coherence and consistency:** external action should be coherent, co-ordinated and consistent across the Organisation, ensuring alignment between political dialogue, parliamentary diplomacy, independent expert monitoring, co-operation programmes, treaty-based activities and institutional outreach.
- **Partnerships based on respect and reciprocity:** external action should be pursued on an equal footing, grounded in mutual respect, reciprocity and mutual learning, avoiding prescriptive approaches, communicating on the strengths of the Council of Europe and taking into account and learning from the diversity of political and institutional contexts.
- **Forward-looking approach:** engagement should seek to anticipate globally evolving and accelerating trends rather than respond only to emerging crises or donors' or partners' requests.

C. Main pillars of the Strategy on External Action

The CoE's external action will focus on cross-cutting priority themes, notably but not limited to, human rights protection, accountability for serious international crimes, social justice, governance of new and emerging technologies, cybercrime, the fight against disinformation and foreign interference, the fight against discrimination and intolerance, protection of the environment, as well as migration and addressing global challenges affecting democratic security and institutional resilience. These priorities align closely with those of the New Democratic Pact for Europe.

Pillar 1 – Expanding participation in the Council of Europe's legal and normative instruments

Objective: to extend the reach of CoE standards globally in support of the promotion of values and principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, as well as democratic security, inter alia by building on results already achieved by different CoE bodies, in particular the Venice Commission, which through its legal opinions fosters ties with non-member States and promotes CoE standards globally, and the North-South Center among others.

The pillar builds upon the demand-driven model, focusing on outreach to partners, including relevant international and regional organisations and other stakeholders, willing to engage on the basis of CoE values, standards and practices, and on priority regions, notably the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as Latin America and Africa.

Particular emphasis should be placed on conventions, among others, in areas such as criminal law, cybercrime, technology and sport, which have proven to be effective entry points for co-operation with non-member States and can serve as practical “door openers” for their broader engagement.

As part of the neighbourhood policy, potential partner countries with an interest in promoting democratic security through human rights, democracy and the rule of law beyond the European continent should be identified.

Main actions:

- Prioritising selected conventions and standards of global relevance for structured proactive outreach beyond the CoE membership, focusing on partner States and priority regions where there is a clear added value to engage.
- Considering the translation of core materials into languages widely spoken internationally where necessary and financially sustainable.
- Ensuring that emerging and future instruments particularly in areas such as accountability, artificial intelligence, criminal law, cybercrime, sport, the environment and, as well as other evolving policy fields, support global applicability and interoperability.
- Strengthening political dialogue, expert exchanges and thematic outreach, complemented by targeted capacity-building, to promote awareness, understanding and upholding of CoE standards and to consolidate standards' implementation, including, where relevant, in areas related to accountability, documentation of damage and support for future reparation mechanisms, in line with decisions taken by member States.

Pillar 2 – Increasing strategic engagement with Observer States and non-member States

Objective: to build structured political and legal dialogue with Observer States and non-member States

The pillar pursues intensified dialogue and co-operation with Observer States and non-member States in a manner consistent with the CoE's values, principles and standards. Observer status should aim to be a strategic platform for sustained dialogue and dissemination of the CoE's standards and expertise in priority regions. Enhanced coherence, clarity and consistency among existing observer-like statuses should be pursued to enhance transparency and strategic effectiveness.

Main actions:

- Deepening substantive engagement with current Observer States, including through an individual annual dialogue at Rapporteurs Group level, more systematic participation and the development of targeted and joint initiatives in areas of mutual strategic interest.
- Encouraging Observer States to adopt additional CoE standards and instruments and to promote them.
- Identifying and engaging potential new Observer States, conditional on adherence to the Organisation's fundamental principles and in line with the existing criteria.

Pillar 3 – Strengthening partnerships with relevant International and Regional Organisations²

Objective: to strengthen the CoE's partnerships with relevant international and regional organisations, in order to enhance mutual exchange, coherence, complementarity and effectiveness within an evolving multilateral ecosystem, in support of the promotion of values, principles and standards of human rights, democracy and the rule of law as well as democratic security.

In a manner consistent with the CoE's values, principles and standards the pillar deepens and develops new structured political dialogue and co-operation with international and regional organisations sharing related mandates, promoting dialogue among them, in full respect of their respective roles and competencies.

² The strategic partnership with the EU is more comprehensively defined in the dedicated report and decisions adopted annually by the Organisation.

Main actions:

- Consolidating and enhancing existing dialogue and co-operation with priority partners, with which relations are already formalised, primarily the European Union, which is the CoE's closest strategic partner, as well as the United Nations and the OSCE.
- Developing dialogue and engagement with other relevant international and regional organisations, with due consideration of international law, while reinforcing relations with already existing partners.
- Strengthening more regular, structured CoE exchanges and co-operation with other multilateral institutions, including by participation in European and global policy fora, such as, but not limited to, the European Political Community (EPC).
- Consolidating and enhancing existing dialogue and co-operation between the ECtHR and key regional/international judicial bodies.

D. Next steps

The Strategy will be followed by an implementation plan outlining the concrete initiatives and measures planned to achieve the objectives set out in the Strategy. Together, these two documents will constitute a roadmap translating shared commitment into achievements.

The effective implementation of this Strategy will require clear institutional leadership, closer co-operation between all relevant CoE entities, and political ownership by member States. Implementation will be supported through the alignment of financial and human resources with the priorities of this Strategy, combining the ordinary budget, within the existing budget allocations and staff resources, voluntary contributions and partnerships. When planning external activities, CoE must be guided by its priorities and responsibilities.